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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PRAGUE 000292

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [AF](#) [EZ](#) [MARR](#) [OVIP](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)  
SUBJECT: GENERAL PETRAEUS MAY 22-24 VISIT TO THE QCZECH  
REPUBLIC

Classified By: Acting Charge d'Affaires John Law,  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: USCENTCOM Commander General David Petraeus visited the Czech Republic May 22-24 May 2009 at the invitation of the Czech Ministry of Defense. General Petraeus met with senior Ministry of Defense, General Staff, and Foreign Ministry officials, conducted several press interviews, and was awarded the Czech National Defense Cross by newly appointed Czech Minister of Defense Martin Bartak. General Petraeus used the visit to thank the Czechs for their important contributions in the Balkans and Iraq and their continued commitment to coalition efforts in Afghanistan. The Czechs currently have approximately 500 soldiers and civilians deployed to Afghanistan and lead a well-regarded Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Logar Province. Newly appointed Czech Minister of Defense Martin Bartak seemed to use the visit as a way to shore-up Czech internal political support of the Ministry's 2010 foreign deployments proposal in advance of its submission to the new Czech caretaker government. Once approved by the government, Bartak explained that the goal was to have the 2010 proposal sent to the Czech Parliament and voted on before summer recess, well before anticipated October Czech parliamentary elections. In a move not seen before, Minister Bartak invited the Czech Civic Democrat Party's (CSSD) shadow Defense Minister Petr Hulinsky to attend the meetings with General Petraeus. However, the current interim government's ability to push Bartak's deployment proposal is limited.  
End Summary.

The Defense Ministry's Deployment Proposal

¶2. (C) Bartak outlined the details of the Czech Ministry of Defense's 2010 foreign deployment proposal. The Czechs plan to concentrate their efforts in 2010 in the Regional Command ) East sector, specifically in Logar and Paktika Provinces, as well as to continue operations in Kabul to include an Operational Mentoring and

Liaison Team (OMLT) that is helping to train Afghan Army helicopter pilots. A 100-man Czech Special Forces contingent operating in the south will finish its 18-month long commitment to OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) and redeploy back to the Czech Republic by the end of 2009. Bartak noted that the plan to further geographically concentrate Czech contributions was in response to calls by the CSSD.

13. (C) Proposed Czech contributions in 2010 will number 535 and will include the expansion of the Czech PRT in Logar (which currently numbers 275) and the deployment of a Czech Mi-17 helicopter detachment to Paktika Province by the end of 2009. Minister Bartak noted that the Czechs had faced significant technical hurdles trying to modernize their helicopters prior to deployment, a situation made worse by complicated relations with Russia. But Bartak and Czech Chief of Defense Pícek both indicated that the helicopter deployment will take place with only a small delay and should be ready by the end of the year. Lastly, Bartak noted that the Czechs will propose to deploy a new OMLT replacing the French provided OMLT currently working with an Afghan National Army (ANA) Kandak in Logar

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Province. Bartak was pushing for this to be a full contact OMLT that remained partnered with the ANA during combat operations.

#### Looming Defense Ministry Budget Cuts

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14. (C) However, Minister Bartak (who has been in his new office only since May 8) also warned of looming, severe budget cuts expected to be taken as part of a government-wide austerity plan necessitated by the weakening Czech economy. Bartak said the cuts could be even deeper than the already expected 10 percent, and may even approach 20 percent in his ministry. Bartak worried that at the higher 20 percent-level such cuts would be devastating and prevent the Czechs from meeting their basic NATO and EU commitment. Bartak emphasized that funding for deployments would be the last to be touched.

#### U.S. Support for Czech Military; Missile Defense

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15. (C) Indicating a sense of frustration, Bartak noted that he hoped ongoing discussions related to a U.S. proposal to provide the Czechs with two excess defense article (EDA) C-130 aircraft could be concluded as quickly as possible and not later than the fall. Bartak noted that he was waiting for the official U.S. offer, noting that the aircraft would enable the Czech Republic to be more self-sufficient in deploying its troops and equipment to Afghanistan. Bartak also noted a U.S. pledge to provide lift and sustain funding in support of Czech deployments to Afghanistan. He also brought up the potential contribution of Czech L-159 trainer/fighter jet

aircraft to Afghanistan and noted that they were very flexible about compensation. Bartak mentioned that the U.S.-Czech missile defense process was currently frozen. He stated that the Czechs were waiting for an assessment from the U.S. side but would be happy to reopen the process in the first half of 2010. The threat from Iranian missiles, he added, was one that he believed would grow.

#### Award and Media Events

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16. (SBU) Minister Bartak awarded General Petraeus the Czech Ministry of Defense's highest decoration, the Czech National Defense Cross. At a press conference and brief T.V. interview following the award ceremony, Bartak used General Petraeus' visit as an attempt to garner wider Czech popular support for ongoing Czech operations in Afghanistan. General Petraeus also took part in the Czech Republic's most respected and popular nationally televised news interview program which reached an audience of approximately one million. Print media press coverage was almost entirely favorable, and emphasized General Petraeus' favorable comments about the professionalism and importance of Czech contributions. General Petraeus also gave an interview to the Prague-based Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty.

#### Meeting with DFM Pojar

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17. (C) At a later meeting with Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Tomas Pojar, Pojar (who is expected to be named as Czech Ambassador to Israel, possibly following the forming of a new government after October elections) seemed most interested in developments in Pakistan and Iran. Pojar asked pointed

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questions about the vulnerability of Iranian nuclear sites to bombing attacks. Pojar also talked about the challenges of dealing with Russia. Pojar noted that current Russian geopolitical behavior seems to be rooted in a historical Russian self identity, more drawn from the Russian empire than its communist past. Pojar, who said he learned how to speak Russian while working with a Czech NGO in Chechnya during the first Chechen war, noted that last summer's Russian move into Georgia was symptomatic of Russia not being comfortable within its current borders.<sup>8</sup> In regard to the Czech European Presidency set to expire at the end of June, Pojar noted that the Czechs' biggest failing as bearers of the EU presidency was a lack of an effective policy regarding Central Asia, where Pojar stated, much more active engagement is necessary.

#### Interim Government's Limited Ability to Push Deployment Plan

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18. (C) Comment: Following the March 24 Czech Parliament's

vote of no confidence in Civic Democrat Party (ODS) Prime Minister Topolánek, the right-of-center coalition government, Martin Barták, who was then First Deputy Defense Minister, was appointed Minister of Defense in Prime Minister Jan Fischer's cabinet of experts' interim government. He will only be in office until a new Czech government is formed following October parliamentary elections. Barták's inclusion of rival Social Democrat Party (ČSSD) Shadow Defense Minister Hulínský in meetings with General Petraeus is a positive development for the Topolánek government, his failure to consult with ČSSD was one reason the ČSSD held up the 2009 deployment bill. However, the interim Fischer government's mandate to introduce any new proposals, including on deployments, is limited, and its ability to muster the political support necessary to pass the bill in parliament is tenuous. Therefore, Barták's plan to move quickly to gain Czech parliamentary approval on the MoD's proposed 2010 foreign deployments bill may well be too optimistic. Privately, several senior Czech officials voiced serious doubts as to whether the opposition ČSSD would support any such bill, especially given lukewarm Czech popular support as well as looming across-the-board government spending cuts that will heavily impact average Czech citizens. The Embassy is focusing on strengthening support for foreign missions among a fatigued Czech public before October elections, which may bring to power a less supportive government. General Petraeus' visit hit all the right notes, helping to shine a positive spotlight on the importance of Czech contributions in Afghanistan at an important time in the debate. The Embassy hopes for future high-level visitors who will help continue public outreach and will engage Czech politicians on the importance of Czech contributions in Afghanistan. End Comment.

19. (U) CENTCOM Headquarters has cleared this cable.  
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